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The Rise and Fall of the Palang Pracharath Party in Thailand: The Problems of Patronage-Oriented Authoritarian Party Building

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This article explores the rise and fall of the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) in Thailand, using it as a case study to illustrate the challenges that transitional military regimes face in retaining power through electoral means. The PPRP's initial success at the ballot was heavily dependent on patronage politics, which, while effective in the short term, ultimately contributed to its downfall. Local elites who managed these patronage networks were not merely passive allies; they actively leveraged their affiliation with the PPRP to solidify their own local power bases instead of the party's institutional capacity. Their loyalty was not to the party but to the resources and opportunities the party provided. This dynamic weakened the PPRP's ability to consolidate power at the national level, leading to internal divisions that eroded its effectiveness in maintaining the military regime's political dominance amid pressures for democratization. The article concludes that the organizational weaknesses of parties such as the PPRP undermine both authoritarian resilience and the prospects for democratic consolidation, compelling regime stakeholders to adopt strategies that, in Thailand's case, further destabilize political institutions.

Keywords: Thailand, authoritarian regimes, democratization, Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), patronage politics.

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Authoritarian regimes often establish political parties and conduct elections not to promote genuine democratization but to consolidate power. Under specific conditions, these institutional arrangements can create a façade of legitimacy and provide a stable framework for power-sharing, enabling authoritarian leaders to maintain or strengthen their control as the political system ostensibly transitions towards democracy.[1] However, the strategies that authoritarian regimes adopt to manipulate party and electoral politics vary significantly across different contexts. Similarly, their effectiveness is highly contingent upon factors such as the characteristics of the regime, the nature and timing of the transition to electoral politics and the institutions and actors involved in electoral competition.[2] Strategies that result in the formation of robust political parties capable of "conceding democracy without conceding defeat" in one context may, in another, produce fragile, poorly institutionalized parties that fail to ensure the long-term security and political dominance that authoritarian regimes seek.[3]

The Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) in Thailand illustrates the challenges that transitional military regimes encounter when using elections to extend their authoritarian rule. This article examines the PPRP's party-building and campaigning strategies to explain why military regimes in Thailand have been successful in seizing power through coups yet have consistently failed to sustain their dominance through political parties and electoral institutions—a paradox that Prajak Kongkirati described as "Thai-style authoritarianism", which explains why there have been so many coups in Thailand over the past century.[4]

The PPRP was established in 2018, drawing its leadership from four primary groups: military generals associated with the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the formal name of the junta that overthrew Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government in May 2014 and ruled until the 2019 general elections; technocrats who served as cabinet ministers under the NCPO-installed government; former leaders of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), a royalist-reactionary pressure group that led mass protests against the Yingluck government; and influential provincial dynasties and factions that commanded extensive patronage networks and voter bases across Thailand. The PPRP framed itself as a pro-military, conservative force committed to maintaining stability and order, with the explicit objective of ensuring that General Prayut

Chan-o-cha, the NCPO leader, remained prime minister even as the military regime prepared for the 2019 general elections, the first to be held after the 2014 coup.

In the 2019 elections, the PPRP won 116 out of 500 seats in the House of Representatives, making it the second largest party in the country. Aided by an array of unfair institutional advantages, these 116 seats were enough for the PPRP to cobble together a pro-military coalition that kept Prayut as prime minister.[5] However, success was short-lived. The PPRP was soon beset by a succession of internal conflicts, fuelled by factional disputes over cabinet positions and tensions within the regime's inner circle, particularly between Prayut and his long-time ally, Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan, who took over the PPRP leadership in 2020. This turmoil unfolded amid the PPRP-led coalition government's struggles to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, unprecedented waves of student-led pro-democracy protests between 2020 and 2021 and the looming inevitability of another general election in 2023 that was widely expected to favour opposition parties.

The PPRP's internal problems came to a head in January 2023 when Prayut severed ties with the party and joined a splinter group, the United Thai Nation Party (UTN). He was named the UTN's prime ministerial candidate shortly before the 2023 general elections. Prayut's departure stripped the PPRP of its ideological foundation and conservative support, triggering mass defections by its politicians. At the 2023 general elections, the PPRP won only 40 seats. The UTN fared even worse, securing just 36 seats.

Table 1
PPRP Election Results: 2019 and 2023 General Elections

Election Year	**Constituency Seats**	**Party List Seats**	**Total Seats**	**Seat Share**	**Constituency Vote Share**	**Party List Vote Share**
2019	97	19	116	23.20%	23.75%	23.75%
2023	39	1	40	8.00%	11.26%	1.43%

Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of Thailand.

Figure 1
Constituencies Won by the PPRP: 2019 and 2023 General Elections

Source: Author's creation based on data from the Election Commission of Thailand.

Following the elections, the PPRP and UTN joined the disparate coalition government led by the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which won the second largest share of seats. This stemmed from a grand compromise between Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister who was overthrown by the military in 2006, and figures within the powerful military-royalist establishment to prevent the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP), which won the most seats, from attaining power. However, the PPRP and UTN were relegated to marginal roles within this new ruling arrangement. For the PPRP, in particular, Prawit's inability to maintain influence within the post-2023 political environment led to further instability and factional strife within his party. Indeed, after a leadership reshuffle in September 2024, the PPRP was expelled from the coalition government, leaving it without cabinet positions for the first time since 2019.

The PPRP's rise and fall mirrors the trajectory of authoritarian parties that came before it, such as the Serimanangkasila Party of the 1950s and the Sahaprachathai and Samakkitham parties.[6] All were formed in an *ad hoc* manner to preserve authoritarian control during transitions to electoral politics, only to implode because of a lack of internal cohesion. What accounts for the PPRP's failure to act as a reliable vehicle for safeguarding the interests of its authoritarian stakeholders and to establish itself as a robust party capable of consolidating power for the NCPO regime? Drawing on personal observations and interviews with politicians and vote canvassers conducted between 2019 and 2020, this article argues that the PPRP's failure to build a strong party stems from its reliance on patronage politics—defined here as the distribution of cash, goods and favours and privileged access to public resources to secure the support of recipients—as a tool for co-optation rather than enforcing internal discipline.[7] In some ways, the PPRP's decision to rely on patronage was understandable: it was founded less than a year before the 2019 general elections, giving it little time to establish proper party mechanisms; it had easy access to funds and patronage resources because of its connections to the NCPO regime; and patronage politics has long been a key determinant in electoral success for all political parties. While this initially benefitted the PPRP, it also enabled the leaders of the patronage networks to exploit their PPRP affiliation to advance their own interests without fully committing to the party or its broader agenda. Consequently, the PPRP struggled to develop a durable and independent grassroots support base, leaving it vulnerable to internal divisions. These divisions ultimately eroded the party's institutional capacity and compromised its ideological mission to sustain the military regime. In other words, the PPRP's reliance on patronage sowed the seeds of its demise.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by exploring the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the PPRP, situating its party-building efforts within the context of Thai politics after the 2014 coup. It then analyses how the PPRP's connections to the military regime influenced its candidate selection and campaign strategies ahead of the 2019 general elections, with particular attention to patronage politics and vote-canvassing networks. Subsequently, the article examines the effects of these strategies on the party's organizational cohesion, focusing on how the leaders of patronage networks might have been co-opted but did not become disciplined advocates for the PPRP. It concludes by looking at the party's

fragmentation and breakdown post-2019, including an analysis of the broader implications of the PPRP's decline on authoritarian durability and the prospects of democratic consolidation in Thailand.

From Military Regime to Authoritarian Successor Party

After toppling Prime Minister Yingluck's government in the May 2014 coup, the NCPO established a military regime that ruled through numerous appointed bodies, including the cabinet, the National Legislative Assembly, the National Reform Council and the Constitutional Drafting Committee. These entities were designed to consolidate support from a narrow group of military and civilian elites, making it an "embedded military regime" that consolidated power by cultivating interdependencies between networks of generals, bureaucrats, policymakers and oligarchs.[8]

A previous military regime had instigated a coup in September 2006 but held elections 15 months later and transferred power to the winning opposition party. However, the NCPO ruled for nearly five years before holding an election. During this period, Thailand witnessed a long-anticipated but delicate royal succession following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016 and a concerted effort to dismantle the Shinawatra family's political network. The 2006 military coup overthrew Thaksin, and his sister, Yingluck, was overthrown in the 2014 coup. However, the Shinawatras remained popular, thanks to the enduring appeal of their policies—such as universal healthcare, debt relief for farmers and local economic initiatives—supported by networks of "Red Shirt" loyalists who remained politically active. Between 2014 and 2019, the NCPO regime attempted to dismantle the Red Shirt networks,[9] monitored the activities of lawmakers who belonged to the Shinawatra-aligned PTP[10] and used Section 44 of the interim Constitution to suspend officials with alleged ties to the Shinawatras.[11] Section 44 granted Prayut, as head of the NCPO, sweeping powers "to order, restrain, or perform any act, whether such act has legislative, executive, or judicial force; the orders and the acts, including the performance in compliance with such orders, shall be deemed lawful and constitutional under this Constitution, and shall be final".[12] Alongside the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the socio-political arm of the military, Section 44 was primarily used to appoint, transfer and suspend government officials. These authoritarian legal instruments enabled the NCPO to tighten its grip on state institutions

and local governments by removing non-compliant individuals and installing or retaining only those loyal to the regime.

To ensure that no genuine transition of power would occur when general elections were eventually held, the military regime established institutional safeguards to concentrate power within the NCPO at the expense of political parties and elected representatives. The mechanisms to "deinstitutionalize" the party system and party institutions were enshrined in the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution and its transitory provisions, which were approved in a stage-managed referendum in 2016.[13] Ahead of the referendum, the NCPO suppressed campaigns against the new charter. The Constitution, ratified in April 2017, introduced a new mixed-member apportionment (MMA) electoral system designed to reduce the influence of large parties such as the PTP.[14] It also allowed the 250-member, NCPO-appointed Senate to vote alongside 500 elected members of parliament (MPs) in the House of Representatives when choosing a prime minister, a provision that allowed military-aligned senators to prevent the MFP from appointing a prime minister after the 2023 general elections but which expired in 2024.[15]

The 2017 Constitution supplemented the existing arrangement that allowed institutions such as the Constitutional Court and the Election Commission of Thailand to intervene in the political process on behalf of conservative interests—a situation described as the "judicialization of politics".[16] These institutions, whose members were appointed or had their tenure extended by the NCPO, played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of the 2019 general elections. They banned parties that opposed the NCPO regime—including the Thai Raksa Chart Party and the Future Forward Party (FFP), a predecessor to the MFP—and endorsed a party-list seat calculation method that favoured the military-backed coalition. The method in question awarded one party-list seat to parties that would not have won any seats under an alternative formula based on a different interpretation of Section 128 of the Constitution. Most of these micro-parties eventually joined the PPRP-led coalition.

While the uneven institutional playing field ensured the regime's dominance, the PPRP, the NCPO regime's electoral vehicle ahead of the 2019 general elections, played a crucial role in a different arena: mobilizing support among the electorate and framing the political narrative around the necessity of Prayut remaining in power after the elections. The PPRP sought to create a semblance of legitimacy for Prayut's continued leadership, particularly among

those who saw him as the only viable solution for restoring peace, order and stability to a country that had experienced nearly a decade of persistent political turmoil before he assumed power. This sense of continuity was embodied in the party's name *pracharath* ("the people's state"), a term adopted from the economic policies—particularly the popular state welfare card scheme—implemented by the NCPO regime before the PPRP was founded.[17]

The PPRP further solidified its identity as an extension of the military regime when one of its executives, Somsak Thepsutin, boldly declared during the party's launch: "This constitution was designed for us."[18] The apparent message was that the political system was engineered to guarantee Prayut's selection as prime minister and the PPRP's dominance. Thus, the PPRP became the final component—and the first line of defence—in the military regime's quest to survive and thrive under the guise of democracy. However, support from a seemingly secure regime did not automatically translate into a decisive electoral advantage for the PPRP. Established towards the end of the NCPO's period of direct military rule, the PPRP faced significant challenges in building electoral support, especially since it was formed less than a year before the planned elections.[19] The PPRP capitalized on its *pracharath* brand to raise awareness among low-income Thais and present Prayut as a leader capable of ending the decade-long political turmoil, using the slogan "Choose Peace, Choose Uncle Tu".[20] While these programmatic and charismatic appeals were central to the PPRP's campaign strategy, they alone did not guarantee electoral success in a political landscape where parties opposed to Thaksin have historically found themselves in the minority since 2001.

To close the gap, the PPRP decided to leverage the NCPO's influence over the military, bureaucracy, independent bodies and local offices to co-opt provincial elites who control patronage networks across Thailand. Patronage networks (*rabob uppatham*) refer to systems of informal, hierarchical relationships that link influential figures—such as politicians, high-ranking officials and business leaders—to their supporters, typically involving the exchange of resources, favours or opportunities for loyalty. Historically, through these networks, provincial elites in Thailand have come to amass significant wealth and power, specifically by mobilizing their supporters at the local level during elections in favour of parties and politicians from whom they can extract ministerial positions, concessions and other advantages. In return for privileged access

to the regime's resources and protection as well as promises of favourable positions in the post-election government, these provincial elites provided the PPRP with an organizational framework and ready-made electoral bases through their control over individual politicians and local vote-canvassing networks.

Making Patronage Work

Patronage politics was integral to the PPRP's party-building strategy from the start, as it sought to construct a "political power grid" to attract support from politicians and local leaders across the country and connect the party with the electorate.[21] Recruitment efforts began informally, long before the party's official launch in November 2018. Following the promulgation of the 2017 Constitution, key figures linked to the military regime started approaching several high-profile politicians, conveying the regime's intention to win the 2019 elections through strategic alliances with those who controlled the most influential patronage networks.

One of the first significant figures to be recruited was Sontaya Khunpluem, the leader of the Phalang Chon Party and the patriarch of Chonburi Province's influential Khunpluem family. Using Section 44 of the interim Constitution, the NCPO regime appointed him as a political advisor to Prime Minister Prayut and mayor of Pattaya, the second largest city in Chonburi Province, in 2018. This sent a strong message that the regime was prepared to reward or protect politicians—even those previously associated with Thaksin, such as Sontaya—if they supported its objectives.[22] According to one source, Sontaya's inclusion was the signal that the PPRP was "ready for boarding".[23] His network subsequently joined the PPRP, fielding candidates for the party in all eight districts of Chonburi Province in the 2019 general elections.

Around the same time, the *Sam Mitr* ("Three Allies") faction was formed, under the auspices of the NCPO, by former cabinet ministers from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), a predecessor of the PTP, and former Wang Nam Yom faction leaders Somsak Thepsutin and Suriya Juangroongruangkit. The faction branded itself as "a group of friends meeting other friends" to navigate the ban on party activities imposed by the NCPO after the 2014 coup using Section 44.[24] In 2018, the *Sam Mitr* faction began recruiting former MPs from the PTP, particularly in upper Central Thailand, lower Northern and Northeastern provinces. This informal alliance

platform enabled the PPRP to tap into a broader base for candidate recruitment, attracting prominent politicians previously associated with the PTP, such as Preecha Rengsomboonsuk, a former cabinet minister, and his faction in Loei Province. The involvement of the *Sam Mitr* faction was a snowball effect, with more factions, families and groups joining the party.[25]

By September 2018, the PPRP had recruited more than one hundred former lawmakers from various parties, representing numerous patronage networks and influential families.[26] Among these were Varathep Rattanakorn, a former Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and Deputy Minister of Agriculture in Yingluck Shinawatra's administration and a former Deputy Finance Minister under Thaksin Shinawatra, who led the faction from Kamphaeng Phet Province; Supol Fongngam, a former Secretary-General of the PTP and Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, who led the faction from Ubon Ratchathani Province; and Santi Prompat, a former Minister of Social Development and Human Security and Minister of Transport, who led the faction from Phetchabun Province. Other key figures included Pinit Jarusombat, a former Deputy Prime Minister, who led the "Wang Phayanak" faction; Suchart Tancharoen, a former Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and twice Deputy Minister of Interior, who led the "Ban Rim Nam" faction; and Aekkarat Changlao, a former Senator from Khon Kaen Province. In addition, the PPRP gained the support of influential political families, such as the Thienthong family in Sa Kaeo Province, known for their political dynasty led by Sanoh Thienthong, the Asavahame family in Samut Prakan Province and the Teekananond family in Udon Thani Province.[27]

Once these factions were on board, the task of selecting PPRP parliamentary candidates in each constituency ahead of the 2019 general elections was delegated to their leaders. A PPRP executive articulated the reasons for this candidate selection strategy:

> Our electoral system is underpinned by *rabob uppatham* [patronage networks] at the subnational level. Do not believe for a second that they are not real or relevant … We rely on these structures to form vote-canvassing networks. This person is in charge of these 1,000 votes. This person is responsible for these 500 votes. This person monitors these 3,000 votes. These mechanisms led us to compete not only for MPs, but also for provincial councillors, subdistrict councillors, mayors, subdistrict chiefs and village heads. If these individuals were to serve as vote canvassers, it

> would be the equivalent of having a portion of the state in our hands, at least at the local level. Do not believe that you would be able to win elections without these components. No way! And when we claim that this or that candidate would win, we are not saying this just because we take the candidate's word for it. We evaluate the candidate based on the size and characteristics of their vote-canvassing networks. If the candidate has all the right qualifications but does not have this, then the candidate does not qualify in our opinion. And this has more weight than *krasae* [popularity] of the party … When we made local visits, [they] would line up their health volunteers, subdistrict chiefs and village heads. We expect to see these components because they tend to guarantee favourable electoral outcomes, regardless of whether *krasae* is positive or negative. It is like pushing a button. You push, and the votes come out.[28]

The PPRP's approach to choosing candidates was deeply rooted in its reliance on established vote-canvassing networks, which were seen as a reliable mechanism for securing electoral success. This strategy was not unique to the PPRP; it reflected a structure of "strong patronage, weak parties" that has shaped Thailand's electoral politics for much of its modern history.[29] After adopting a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand's political system was dominated by bureaucratic elites, while the power of elected representatives was constrained for almost four decades.[30] Coups, not elections, became the decisive route to power, which meant authoritarian leaders focused on honing their coup-making abilities, not developing robust party organizations.[31] What mattered most was securing support from a small group of military and bureaucratic elites, not establishing durable parties grounded in popular support.

However, by the 1970s, elections became more competitive,[32] yet the political system became more vulnerable to domination by influential provincial leaders, known as *jao pho*. Strategically positioned between national and local spheres, these provincial leaders built formidable political dynasties and patronage networks that made them indispensable power brokers and electoral gatekeepers, making it difficult for any political party, including military-backed ones, to bypass them.[33] Even in 2019, as the PPRP entered the electoral fray, these entrenched factions and families continued to serve as the backbone for electoral mobilization.

When it was formed in 2018, the PPRP's popularity (*krasae*) was volatile or region-specific. It was effective in Bangkok and Southern Thailand, where a conservative electorate favoured its

prime ministerial candidate and the party's conservative brand. However, relying solely on *krasae* was insufficient in the Northern and Northeastern (Isan) regions, where military-backed parties were unpopular, especially among Thaksin supporters, and in Central Thailand, where local concerns outweighed party loyalty.[34] In these areas, the PPRP needed to replace *krasae* with patronage.

From the perspective of PPRP leaders, the "size and characteristics" of vote-canvassing networks were considered the most important predictors of electoral success.[35] Candidates linked to factions or families with influence over the local bureaucracy or Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAO)—a local government body responsible for managing provincial affairs, with its executive and council members elected by the local population—were preferred over those whose influence was narrower.[36] This approach also guided how the party allocated campaign funds. The PPRP used an informal ranking system that categorized candidates into three tiers based on their track record and their network's size and reputation.[37] "A-tier" candidates, with strong networks and reputations, received the most funding, often exceeding 30 million baht (around US$883,700). "B-tier" candidates, who may have narrowly lost a race for a seat at a previous election or had smaller networks, received between 20 and 25 million baht (US$589,000–US$736,200), while "C-tier" candidates received minimal support.[38]

However, the PPRP's reliance on factional leaders to distribute campaign funds created problems. Funds were delivered to faction leaders, who sometimes withheld portions of the money, leaving individual candidates to fend for themselves.[39] These leaders also exercised considerable discretion over how the funds were used. For instance, a PPRP candidate in the Northeastern region had to seek alternative funding just days before the election because the regional leader had failed to provide the allocated funds on time.[40] In another province, "A-tier" candidates allegedly used campaign funds to settle personal debts instead of financing their electoral efforts.[41] This illustrates a far more existential problem for the PPRP: it failed to effectively manage its co-opted networks.

Co-optation without Discipline

The PPRP was exceptionally well-equipped with resources to co-opt key political figures and networks, owing to its tacit alliance with the NCPO regime. In addition to access to funds, it also had

privileged access to state institutions, significantly enhancing its ability to tempt politicians with promises of favours and jobs or, conversely, to threaten those who refused to cooperate. Indeed, its alliance with the NCPO regime gave the PPRP the leverage needed to overcome the resistance of faction leaders who might otherwise have been indifferent to the party's prospects or offers of financial support. A PPRP insider articulated the connection between the party's alliance with the NCPO and its co-optation strategy:

> Let us start with the fact that we worked with the military. They had their own teams and networks of military officers, police officers and bureaucrats within the Ministry of Interior. These were the levers of the state that were deployed to assist us in recruiting factions and candidates. In plain language, state power always plays a role in every election in Thailand, but [during this election] we were given total and exclusive access to state power, which enabled us to persuade, coerce or offer protection to targeted individuals who had potential.[42]

The state apparatus has historically played an important role in shaping the outcomes of Thai elections, particularly before 1973, when the Ministry of Interior held significant top-down influence over local leaders and election officials. Not only were "the levers of the state" concentrated in the hands of those aligned with the NCPO, but the NCPO also leveraged Section 44, exercised control over ISOC networks and influenced regulatory bodies with appointed members, such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission.[43] This made it advantageous, even necessary, for politicians facing legal challenges to seek protection from the NCPO regime—and, thus, from the PPRP. Several faction leaders who supported the PPRP in 2019—including Santi Prompat, Virat Ratanaset, Sontaya Khunpluem, Varathep Rattanakorn and Anucha Nakasai—were either themselves or had family members embroiled in criminal charges, under investigation for crimes or suspended from local administration organizations.[44] Had the PPRP not been perceived as an extension of the NCPO regime, capable of rewarding or punishing influential figures based on their allegiance, the party's aggressive co-optation strategy might not have been effective or even viable.

However, the PPRP struggled to enforce organizational discipline despite this leverage, largely due to the NCPO regime's reluctance to consolidate power through party institutions. Similar to previous military governments, the NCPO preferred to govern without the constraints of party and parliamentary politics. For instance, while

Prayut was the PPRP's prime ministerial candidate, he refrained from taking on any leadership role within the party, leaving the formal role of party leader to Uttama Savanayana. Prayut's approach mirrored the semi-democratic rule of General Prem Tinasulanonda, who governed between 1980 and 1988 with support from the monarchy, appointed representatives and political parties that operated somewhat autonomously from his leadership.

During the campaigns before the 2019 general elections, Prayut made only one public appearance as the PPRP's prime ministerial candidate. Even after the election, he remained distant from party activities, entrusting the oversight to Prawit.[45] However, this created uncertainty about the actual locus of power within the party, at least before Prawit formally became party leader in 2020. The lack of a clear chain of command led to intense competition among factions for influence and control, evident as early as the candidate selection process.

As previously mentioned, the PPRP allowed faction leaders to manage the candidate selection process in their respective provinces. This arrangement enabled the party to grow rapidly, yet it also intensified rivalries between different factions with overlapping claims, with the ensuing power struggles often resolved through backroom deals and shifting alliances between the influential stakeholders, not through formal party mechanisms. For example, in Kamphaeng Phet Province, one of the *Sam Mitr* faction's leaders, Somsak Thepsuthin, lobbied for his own candidates to run in all four of the province's constituencies, raising concerns among Varathep Rattanakorn's faction, which included several incumbent lawmakers who had defected from the PTP. Varathep's faction requested that the PPRP hierarchy intervene, but no agreement was reached. The conflict was only resolved after a third faction in the region intervened in the negotiations, shifting the balance of power in favour of Varathep's faction and neutralizing the *Sam Mitr* faction's influence.[46]

The situation was more complex in the Northeastern region, with NCPO affiliates actively intervening in the candidate selection process, often bypassing the PPRP's formal mechanisms. According to a member of the *Sam Mitr* faction: "We had already recruited A-Tier candidates, but the military wanted to field their own people, who were not Grade A candidates, as a way to build their political base."[47] These informal arrangements reinforced the perception that power was vested in elite settlements involving

party factions and influential stakeholders operating behind the scenes rather than the PPRP's executive committee. This made the party appear more like a hollow shell, merely projecting the illusion of a robust organization. Indeed, accommodating factional differences and interests often entailed undermining or bypassing the party's authority altogether.

Yet, the PPRP's failure to "order power" was not just a result of a lack of political will, nor was it unique to the party.[48] The frequent and turbulent transitions between democracy and military rule in Thailand have stifled the institutionalization of political parties and created an environment conducive to entrenching patronage networks outside the framework of political parties. Whereas political parties have often struggled to establish local roots, patronage networks have proved more successful in embedding themselves into the fabric of local communities. As a result, although these networks can be co-opted by a regime with centralized control over the national bureaucracy or by political parties seeking to expand their influence, they cannot be wholly substituted.[49] At the subnational level, the linkages necessary for electoral mobilization remain firmly in the hands of provincial and local elites, beyond the direct control of any political party or regime. This disparity enabled factions aligned with the PPRP to exploit the party's association with the NCPO regime to consolidate their own political base while maintaining their autonomy from the party. This included turning former adversaries, such as the ISOC—initially tasked with monitoring former Pheu Thai politicians and Red Shirt leaders—into powerful allies, overcoming local rivals and unifying previously divergent loyalties among faction members, local officials and vote canvassers.

In Kamphaeng Phet Province, the faction led by Varathep exemplified this dynamic. While outwardly united against rivals from other parties, the network was internally fractured in 2019, with two distinct camps vying for influence, particularly over the control of the PAO, which was set to be contested in 2020. Varathep, a former deputy finance minister from Thaksin's TRT party and the son of a district chief in Bueng Samakkhi district, supported his brother, Soonthorn Rattanakorn, the incumbent PAO chief. However, Pai Lik, Kamphaeng Phet MP, viewed his father, veteran politician Ruangwit Lik, as the faction's original patron and, thus, his own family as the rightful *baan yai* ("big house") in Kamphaeng Phet Province. In the local election race, Pai Lik backed Julaphan Tubtim, a former PAO chief.

As these internal tensions simmered, Varathep's position was threatened from the outside. The Supreme Court barred him from political office in 2009 and gave him a two-year suspended prison sentence over a corruption case involving the government lottery. (The charge was seen as part of targeted efforts against Thaksin's loyalists, which Varathep previously was.) After the 2014 coup, the NCPO regime, using Section 44, suspended Varathep's brother, Soonthorn, from his post as PAO chief, pending a corruption investigation. Furthermore, individuals associated with his faction were closely monitored by military officials. Some reported that their homes were raided by the military, and their relatives were detained or faced lawsuits.[50] The faction's previous affiliation with parties like Thaksin-aligned parties rendered it vulnerable to the regime's targeted political and legal sanctions.

The 2019 general elections were a crucial test for the Varathep faction. Despite the risk of alienating some of its supporters, who were loyal to the Shinawatras' PTP, it aligned with the PPRP. However, this was not a desperate bid at political survival but a strategic adaptation to the changing political landscape. The Varathep faction announced its switch to the PPRP on 23 November 2018—just days before the deadline for registering parliamentary candidates—leaving the PTP little time to find suitable replacements. The faction also warned local leaders that refusing to support the PPRP could lead to serious consequences for them, such as their removal from office or increased scrutiny by security officials. These consequences were similar to those experienced by some factions after the 2014 coup.[51] In the brief period between the switch and the elections, the Varathep faction reasserted its control over local leaders and vote canvassers by emphasizing the importance of being part of the future governing coalition to ensure the flow of resources to Kamphaeng Phet Province. While the NCPO regime wielded both the carrot and the stick, the faction delivered the threats and promises. According to one faction member:

> We told them [our supporters and local leaders] that we were like students who changed schools. If the new school is bad, it is not as if we could not be good students. We were still the same people—their people … we told them that we could not sail against the tide and that there were a lot of people who were expecting to eat from this boat. We just got on that boat and did what was expected of us as representatives.[52]

To ordinary voters, the Varathep faction downplayed its association with the military regime to avoid backlash from those still loyal

to the PTP. Instead, its campaign focused almost entirely on local unity, continuity of local leadership and the faction's contributions to Kamphaeng Phet Province. For instance, in one constituency, no campaign poster featured the image of Prayut, the PPRP's prime ministerial candidate.[53] Instead, their 200 posters were carefully sequenced. The first 50 posters featured Kamphaeng Phet Province's former parliamentarians, including Ruangwit Lik and Kanung Thaiprasit, to convey the message of uniting the province behind the faction. The next 50 posters featured the image of the constituency candidate Waipoj Apornrat alongside the slogan: "Choose Waipoj, get water for rice farming". The final 100 posters focused on the PPRP's policies. As one faction member explained: "We put up the posters exactly in this sequence just in case the party *krasae* [popularity] wasn't blowing in our favour."[54]

The Varathep faction's strategy of focusing on local unity and the personal qualities of its candidates over partisan or national issues was reinforced by the mobilization of vote-canvassing networks at the village and subdistrict levels. These networks are typically overseen by local elected officials loosely affiliated with the faction, including members of the PAO and Subdistrict Administrative Organizations. The author's observation of these officials in action revealed that their roles extended beyond merely monitoring or facilitating clientelist exchanges of money for votes during elections. Many seemed to be held in high regard by ordinary voters as leaders who had earned respect and trust through their contributions to local communities.

An illustrative example of this came during the author's visit to a hill tribe village in Kamphaeng Phet Province that was mainly inhabited by the Christian Lahu community. The villagers had been forced to leave their homes in the highland areas that had become part of a protected national park but without being granted permanent land rights by the government. This left them politically and economically vulnerable, with no guarantees of livelihood, forest access for foraging and agricultural land for farming. For seven years, the villagers relied on their connection with Dee, a member of the Kamphaeng Phet PAO, to resolve their disputes with law enforcement officers who disproportionately targeted the villagers because of their lack of national IDs and their foraging in areas of the protected national park. Dee's ties with the village ran deep. She attended village meetings and Sunday services at the local church regularly—so regularly, in fact, that some villagers mistakenly believed she was a Christian.[55] While the village elders

remembered supporting the PPRP and its candidate in the 2019 elections, many villagers did not. Instead, they remembered vividly "voting for Dee", despite her not being a candidate in the elections. In their case, casting a ballot for the PPRP likely signified support for their local benefactor rather than a genuine endorsement of the party or Prayut.

In the end, the Varathep faction's strategic gamble paid off. It won all four constituencies in Kamphaeng Phet Province in the 2019 elections. It also triumphed in a by-election triggered after Waipoj was disqualified as a lawmaker in September 2019, a case that stemmed from his involvement in disrupting a regional summit nearly a decade earlier when he was a "Red Shirt" leader. Waipoj's son, Phetphum, successfully replaced him in parliament, winning the by-election in February 2020, despite rumours that Pai Lik, a rival within the faction, secretly backed a PTP candidate against him. Although Varathep himself did not secure a seat in parliament or in the cabinet, likely due to past lawsuits against him, he did become deputy chairman of the budget scrutiny panel[56] under the PPRP's quota.[57] The faction also resolved the legal difficulties facing Varathep's brother, Soonthorn, who reclaimed his role as chief executive of the Kamphaeng Phet PAO. In the 2020 local elections, Soonthorn was re-elected by a landslide. Pai Lik, who had allied with Thammanat Prompao, withdrew from supporting a different candidate, possibly because he recognized that he was not yet ready to challenge Varathep's leadership so openly. In the end, the Varathep faction not only successfully navigated its transition to the PPRP; it also emerged from the process even stronger than before.

One should be cautious when drawing broad generalizations from these events in Kamphaeng Phet Province, as the characteristics of the electorate and patronage networks can vary across provinces and regions. However, interviews with other faction leaders within the PPRP reveal a recurring theme: many factions that switched allegiances to the party strengthened their local power bases without relinquishing control of their networks to the party or NCPO regime. According to one faction leader from a province in Central Thailand, this strategy is consistent with their long-standing approach in the Thai political landscape:

> I have never used the party's policy platform or brand to decorate myself. Even when I was with the TRT, I knew I needed to establish my own foundation. The Thai political landscape is

> inherently unstable, and political parties are only temporary. To stay in this game, I knew I must ensure that voters choose me without a second thought about which party I am affiliated with.[58]

Another faction leader from a different Central Thailand province remarked: "Our *phuak* [faction] mostly lead the people. We are not followers. We are leaders."[59] This ability to exert influence at the local level without relying on partisan attachment at the national level was precisely what the PPRP leaders sought and depended on for their electoral strategy in 2019. However, according to one PPRP executive, this also enabled the faction leaders to "use the power of the military for their own benefits…they acted obedient and submissive in order to receive the money, protection, and the state's support during election campaigns."[60] Indeed, the legacy of military rule gave the PPRP a distinct advantage in co-opting local elites through patronage. However, this advantage did not translate into absolute control over the actions of the local elites, nor did it ensure their compliance and loyalty beyond the initial alliance. Far from being passively co-opted, these local elites retained considerable autonomy and, when possible, advanced their own interests over building support for the PPRP.

Fragmentation and Breakdown

The consequences of the PPRP's failure to build a robust organization through patronage became increasingly evident after the 2019 general elections. A familiar pattern of infighting emerged: there were not enough cabinet posts to satisfy the demands of various factions, yet each claimed credit for the party's electoral success. For example, the *Sam Mitr* faction was denied the coveted energy ministry, while one of its leaders, Anucha Nakasai, was left without a cabinet position. This sparked intense infighting within the PPRP as factions began to scramble for jobs in the government.

To strengthen their bargaining power, several factions fiercely competed to recruit new members from the pool of newly elected PPRP lawmakers, especially those who initially lacked strong factional allegiances or were part of factions that lacked financial support or connections within the party. This practice, common in Thai politics, is called "fishing from a friend's pond".[61] As a result, the most financially well-equipped factions gained disproportionate influence within the PPRP while sidelining those with technocratic expertise.[62]

In June 2020, the most powerful factions within the PPRP orchestrated an internal coup under the pretext of making Prawit the party leader. However, the real aim was to purge the party's technocrats like former leader Uttama Savanayana and former secretary-general Sontirat Sontijirawong—both of whom held ministerial positions but did not control any MPs. This imbalance frustrated faction leaders who had built strong support bases within the party but were overlooked for cabinet positions. By removing the technocrats, they aimed to create openings for themselves, precipitate a cabinet reshuffle and use Prawit's influence to convince Prayut to offer them favourable cabinet positions. However, Prawit's takeover did little to curb factional turmoil. On the contrary, factions that claimed to have Prawit's backing engaged in more pronounced confrontations with each other and, ultimately, with Prayut. In September 2021, the PPRP's secretary-general, Captain Thammanat Prompao, plotted to unseat Prayut in a no-confidence vote. Although Thammanat's attempt failed and he was dismissed from the cabinet and the party, he maintained a close alliance with Prawit, who was allegedly aware of but turned a blind eye to Thammanat's plot.[63] This episode fuelled rumours that Prawit had formed a secret alliance with Thaksin and the PTP and was using Thammanat as a proxy in a bid to replace Prayut as prime minister.

The growing rift between Prayut and Prawit reached breaking point when Prayut was suspended from his duties in August 2022, pending the Constitutional Court's decision on his term limit. The Court accepted a petition from the opposition to rule on Prayut's eight-year term limit, with the key issue being whether he had completed his term, having first become prime minister in August 2014. In September 2022, the Constitutional Court ruled that Prayut had not yet reached his term limit, deeming that his tenure had begun in April 2017 when the current Constitution took effect. However, this ruling meant that Prayut could only serve as prime minister until mid-2025. He would not have been able to fulfil an entire term in office had he been re-elected at the 2023 elections. Moreover, the ruling effectively split the PPRP into two camps: those who backed Prayut as the party's only prime ministerial candidate ahead of the 2023 elections and those who backed Prawit as his substitute. (The latter argued that Prawit should be nominated alongside Prayut as a prime ministerial candidate so he can take over when Prayut's term limit expires in mid-2025.) Having lost control of the PPRP, Prayut joined the newly formed

UTN in January 2023, bringing several political heavyweights from the PPRP with him.

Prayut's departure left the PPRP without a charismatic figure and hollowed out what remained of its conservative ideology. Consequently, in its campaign ahead of the 2023 general elections, it had little to offer regarding party branding. More critically, it no longer had exclusive control of state institutions and appointed bodies, which had been pivotal to its co-optation strategy in 2019. Despite retaining the factions led by Thammanat Prompao, Varathep Rattanakorn and Santi Prompat—all of which won every seat in their provinces in 2023—the PPRP lost 76 seats, down from 116 to 40. Ultimately, the party's reliance on patronage proved insufficient to counter the strong mandate for change and the clear rejection of military-backed parties from the public, particularly among younger and ideological voters who were more engaged with social media and actively shunned patronage networks.

As the PPRP diminished in size and influence, it struggled to adapt to the emerging power-sharing arrangement between the PTP and the conservative establishment. On 22 August 2023—100 days after the general elections—Thaksin returned to Thailand after 15 years of self-imposed exile in Dubai. Just a few hours later, Srettha Thavisin of the PTP was elected prime minister with the support of conservative parties and Prayut-aligned senators.[64] Ten days later, Thaksin received a royal pardon that commuted his prison sentence from eight years to one year. This sequence of events appeared to be part of a broader political compromise to allow the PTP to govern in exchange for countering intensified calls for reform brought forth by the 2020–21 pro-democracy protests and the push by the MFP, the largest opposition party, to amend the *lèse-majesté* law.[65]

Although the PPRP joined the PTP-led coalition after the 2023 elections, its influence was significantly reduced, reflecting the relatively small number of seats the party contributed to the 11-party coalition, which comprised 314 MPs. More importantly, in May 2024, with the senators Prawit had helped appoint completing their tenure and no longer able to participate in the selection of the prime minister alongside the House, Prawit lost a key source of political leverage that had previously guaranteed his influence and ensured the inclusion of his party in government. Three months later, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the PTP leader and Thaksin's daughter, replaced Srettha as prime minister, sparking a new conflict between

Prawit and Thammanat over control of cabinet portfolios under the PPRP's quota. This dispute triggered yet another round of infighting that resulted in the PTP dropping the PPRP from the coalition on 4 September 2024, leaving the party without cabinet seats for the first time since 2019.

Conclusion

The PPRP has had remarkable success and failure. Its performance in the 2019 general elections demonstrated the military regime's capacity to reshape the institutional landscape and experiment with party and electoral politics as a potential means of maintaining power. By introducing elections within a system where it had substantial control over resources, institutions and the rules of the game—and by positioning the PPRP as the gatekeeper of these elements—the NCPO regime successfully created vested interests among political actors who sought its backing to secure their own interests and survival.

However, the PPRP's authoritarian legacy meant it could co-opt local elites only by granting them greater autonomy. Their loyalty was not to the party but to the resources and opportunities the party provided.[66] While this strategy may have initially strengthened the party's election performance, it ultimately undermined the PPRP's ability to ensure that these local elites adhered to its policies, decisions and collective goals. The patronage-oriented co-optation practised by the PPRP resulted in another under-institutionalized and incoherent electoral vehicle, echoing the fate of many previous Thai parties. The implications of this outcome are far-reaching for Thailand's broader political landscape. The PPRP's failure to build and sustain a robust party organization capable of protecting authoritarian interests underscores the reluctance of authoritarian leaders to fully embrace party politics as a means of consolidating power. It also highlights the structural limitations of patronage politics in Thailand.

While those who wield patronage can be co-opted by authoritarian power, turning them into disciplined subordinates who prioritize party objectives over their own interests remains a formidable challenge—and one likely to persist as long as those attempting to construct authoritarian parties lack the ability to cultivate support through a well-defined party identity, ideological commitment or policy proposals, instead relying on the mobilizational power of patronage networks.

This reliance on patronage becomes a double-edged sword, particularly in Thailand, where patronage politics operates almost entirely outside the purview of party organizations. The organizational frailty of political parties such as the PPRP weakens both authoritarian durability and the prospects for democratic consolidation in Thailand. Without a robust party framework, the conservative royal-military establishment, fearful of the consequences of democratization, finds itself cornered into choosing between crippling democratic institutions through judicial interventions or more outright authoritarian measures, such as coups and direct military rule.

History has shown that neither approach leads to long-term stability, order or effective governance. Instead, they have perpetuated cycles of unrest that erode public trust in the political system. The failure to build a coherent political party through patronage, though only one of many contributing factors, highlights the urgent need for Thailand to develop political institutions capable of either circumventing or effectively integrating the functions traditionally served by patronage networks. However, achieving such a transformation seems improbable given the establishment's current inclination towards divide-and-rule tactics, its reluctance to embrace mass political participation and its vested interest in keeping parties impotent, elections superficial and the status quo intact.

NOTES

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1. According to Barbara Geddes, party-based regimes are often more durable than military and personalist regimes. See Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?", *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1 June 1999): 115–44. For an analysis of the conditions under which the holding of competitive multiparty elections can serve the interest of authoritarian rulers, see Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 19; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

2. James Loxton and Scott Mainwaring, *Life after Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[3] Rachel Beatty Riedl, Dan Slater, Joseph Wong and Daniel Ziblatt, "Authoritarian-Led Democratization", *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, no. 1 (2020): 320.

[4] Prajak Kongkirati, "Why Thailand's Generals Fail to Co-opt Elections", *New Mandala*, 15 January 2019, https://www.newmandala.org/why-thailands-generals-fail-to-co-opt-elections/.

[5] Jacob I. Ricks, "Thailand's 2019 Vote: The General's Election", *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2019): 443–57.

[6] Kongkirati, "Why Thailand's Generals Fail to Co-opt Elections".

[7] On patronage politics, see Martin Shefter, "Party and Patronage: Germany, England, and Italy", *Politics & Society* 7, no. 4 (1 December 1977): 403–51; Edward Aspinall, Meredith Weiss, Allen Hicken and Paul Hutchcroft, *Mobilizing for Elections: Patronage and Political Machines in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[8] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand", *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (July 2018): 279–305.

[9] Author's interview with "Sorn", a parliamentary candidate in a Northeastern province and former member of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, in Bangkok, 14 February 2020. (To ensure confidentiality, unless otherwise indicated, all names of informants mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.)

[10] Author's interview with "Pich", a member of a local political family that previously supported the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), in Kamphaeng Phet Province, 7 November 2020.

[11] "แยกหมวดหมู่ 258 จนท.รัฐ-ผู้บริหารท้องถิ่นถูกคำสั่ง หน.คสช.พักงาน-โยกย้าย" [Categorizing 258 State and Local Officials Suspended or Transferred by Head of the NCPO Order], Isranews Agency, 31 July 2016, https://www.isranews.org/content-page/item/48888-m44_48888oo.html.

[12] *Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (Interim), B.E. 2557 (2014)* (Bangkok, Thailand: Foreign Law Bureau, Office of the Council of State, 2014).

[13] Viengrat Nethipo, Erik Martinez Kuhonta and Akanit Horatanakun, "Regime Consolidation through Deinstitutionalisation: A Case Study of the 2019 Elections in Thailand", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2023): 265–85.

[14] In this electoral system, each voter submits a single ballot. This ballot is used for electing the parliamentary candidate in a specific district and contributes to determining the total proportion of seats each party should have in parliament. After constituency seats are filled, additional seats from party lists are distributed to help parties achieve the proportional representation they are entitled to, based on the total votes they received. However, a key aspect of this system is that if a party wins more constituency seats than its proportional share of the vote would grant, it cannot receive any additional seats from the party list. For example, in the 2019 general elections, the PTP did not receive any party-list seats because the number of constituency seats it secured was already higher than its proportional share of the national vote.

[15] The Senate selection process involved the creation of a selection committee comprising 9 to 12 members responsible for nominating 400 candidates. From this pool, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) handpicked 194 members, while six seats were reserved for commanders of the armed forces, the national police commander and the Minister of Defence. The remaining 50 members were chosen by the NCPO from a shortlist of 200 candidates voted on by fellow nominees and applicants from various occupational and social groups.

[16] Duncan McCargo, "Competing Notions of Judicialization in Thailand", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (18 December 2014): 417–41.

[17] Launched in 2016, the *Pracharath* Card scheme was designed to address chronic poverty and develop a national e-payment system. The programme provided eligible low-income individuals with a government welfare card, which offered monthly allowances for essential goods, public transportation, cooking gas discounts and utility subsidies. Eligible recipients include those earning up to 30,000 baht (US$890) annually and those earning between 30,000 and 100,000 baht (US$890–US$2,967) with limited financial and landed assets.

[18] "'สุริยะ' โว พปชร.ยิ่งใหญ่กว่าไทยรักไทย 'สมศักดิ์' ชี้ รธน.นี้ ดีไซน์มาเพื่อพวกเรา" ['Suriya' Boasts PPRP Is Greater Than Thai Rak Thai, 'Somsak' Points Out This Constitution Was Designed for Us], *Matichon Online*, 18 November 2018, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1232373.

[19] In this regard, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) resembles what James Loxton calls "reactive authoritarian successor parties", as distinguished from "former authoritarian ruling parties" that govern during the periods before the transition to democracy. See James Loxton, "Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide: A Framework for Analysis", University of Sidney Working Papers, June 2013, p. 3.

[20] Hataikarn Treesuwan, "เลือกตั้ง 2562: สำรวจวาทกรรม 'เลือกความสงบ' ในการเลือกตั้ง 2 กระแส" [2019 Election: Examining the Discourse of 'Choosing Peace' in Two Election Currents], *BBC News Thai*, 20 March 2019, https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-47641166.

[21] Author's interview with an MP for the PPRP and a faction leader in Bangkok, 5 February 2020.

[22] After Itthiphon Khunpluem, Sontaya's brother, completed his tenure as mayor of Pattaya, Police Major General Anan Charoenhawasri was appointed as the new mayor in February 2017 using the power of Section 44. On 17 April 2018, Sontaya became an advisor to Prayut. Then, on 25 September 2018, Prayut once again used Section 44 to appoint Sontaya as the new mayor of Pattaya, replacing Anan.

[23] Author's interview with a technocrat who worked with the PPRP in Bangkok, 20 July 2021.

[24] Author's interview with a PPRP parliamentary candidate in Bangkok, 24 February 2020.

[25] Author's interview with "Wong" in Bangkok, 11 October 2021.

[26] On factions in the PPRP, see Paul Chambers, "Thailand's Elected Junta: The Pluralistic Poverty of Phalang Pracharat", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/29, 12 March

2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-29-thailands-elected-junta-the-pluralistic-poverty-of-phalang-by-pracharat-paul-chambers/; Punchada Sirivunnabood, "The Rules Change but the Players Don't: Factional Politics and Thailand's March 2019 Elections", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 3 (2019): 390–417.

27 In addition to these factions, in Bangkok, the party recruited Nataphol Teepsuwan and Buddhipongse Punnakanta, former leaders of People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). In areas of the country where the PPRP could not recruit dominant families or factions, such as Southern Thailand and a few provinces in the Northern region, the party designated its own regional heads. Notable figures in these areas included Captain Thammanat Prompao in the Northern region, Colonel Suchart Chantarachotikul in the Southern region and Anumat Amat in the Deep South. These individuals assumed *de facto* leadership positions within their respective factions. Regarding the details on the actual composition of factions recruited by the PPRP, see Sirivunnabood, "The Rules Change but the Players Don't", pp. 390–417.

28 Author's interview with "Wong" in Bangkok, 11 October 2021.

29 Paul Hutchcroft, *Strong Patronage, Weak Parties: The Case for Electoral System Redesign in the Philippines* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2020).

30 On this discussion, see Fred Warren Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu, Hawaii: East-West Center Press, 1966); Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand", in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by R. H. Taylor (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 1996), p. 221.

31 Prajak Kongkirati, "Power without the Polls: Thai-Style Authoritarian Fragility amid the Defeat of Military-Backed Parties", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 45, no. 3 (2023): 406–13.

32 According to Benedict Anderson, the rise of violent incidents targeting political candidates in the 1980s implies that "not only does being an MP offer substantial opportunities for gaining wealth and power, but it promises comfortably to do so for the duration". See Benedict Anderson, "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam", *New Left Review*, no. 181 (1990): 46. This view echoes Daniel Arghiros' argument that the increasing importance of money in mobilizing voters suggests that votes cannot simply be claimed based on a candidate's status as a patron but that they must be purchased. While counterintuitive, the rise of electoral violence and money politics collectively demonstrate that elections have become more competitive and consequential. See Daniel Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001).

33 On the role of patronage and vote-canvassing networks in Thai elections, see Sombat Chantornvong, *เลือกตั้งวิกฤต : ปัญหาและทางออก* [Thai Election in Crisis: Problems and Solutions] (Bangkok, Thailand: Kob Fai, 1993); Arghiros, *Democracy, Development, and Decentralization in Provincial Thailand*; Ruth McVey, *Money and Power in Provincial Thailand* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Anyarat Chattharakul, "Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian*

Affairs 29, no. 4 (24 February 2011): 67–95; Viengrat Netipho, *หีบบัตรกับบุญคุณ: การเมืองการเลือกตั้งและการเปลี่ยนแปลงเครือข่ายอุปถัมภ์* [The Ballot Box and Indebtedness: Electoral Politics and Changes in the Patronage System] (Bangkok, Thailand: Center for ASEAN Studies, Chiang Mai University, 2015).

34 Author's interview with "Wong" in Bangkok, 11 October 2021.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Author's interview with a PPRP executive in Bangkok, 24 September 2020.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Author's fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Udon Thani Province, 20 March 2019.

41 Author's interview with "Wong" in Bangkok, 17 September 2020.

42 Author's interview with a PPRP executive in Bangkok, 17 September 2020.

43 Ibid.

44 For example, Virat Ratanaset and his wife and sister were under investigation for their involvement in a corruption scandal related to the construction of futsal fields in schools across 19 provinces, particularly in the Northeast region. Varathep Rattanakorn's brother, Soonthorn, and Anucha Nakasai's brother, Anusorn, were both suspended from their roles as chief executives of the Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAO) of Kamphaeng Phet and Chai Nat provinces, respectively, pending corruption investigations.

45 "'ลุงป้อม' ปรับโหมด 'ผู้จัดการรัฐบาล'ตัวจริง!!" ["Uncle Pom" Shifts Gear to Become the Real Manager of the Government!!], *Manager Online*, 16 August 2019, https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9620000078154.

46 Author's fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet Province, 7 November 2020.

47 Author's interview with an MP for the PPRP and member of the *Sam Mitr* faction in Bangkok, 24 February 2020.

48 Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

49 This resonates with James C. Scott's insight that "the essential distinction is one between a party that has created its own network of patron-client linkages from the center and a party that relies on preexisting patron-client bonds and merely incorporates them into its organization". See James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia", *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 1 (1972): 111.

50 Author's fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet Province, 7 November 2020.

51 Author's interview with members of the Kamphaeng Phet faction in Bangkok, 30 January 2020.

52 Author's interview with "Pich" in Kamphaeng Phet Province, 7 November 2020.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Author's fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet Province, 7 November 2020.

[56] The scrutiny committee, formally known as the Ad Hoc House Committee For The Consideration Of The Annual Budget Bill, is a special body appointed by the House of Representatives to thoroughly review the budget proposed by the cabinet. Its influence stems from its authority to examine, amend and approve the budget.

[57] Thailand's scrutiny committee operates under a quota system based on proportional representation, with seats allocated according to the number of seats each political party holds in the House of Representatives.

[58] Author's interview with a leading member of a faction in the PPRP in Bangkok, 5 February 2020.

[59] Author's interview with an MP for the PPRP and faction leader in Bangkok, 22 January 2020.

[60] Author's interview with a PPRP executive in Bangkok, 20 July 2020.

[61] Author's interview with "Wong" in Bangkok, 11 October 2021.

[62] This situation arose from a paradox within the PPRP's strategy. While the party's approach of co-opting faction leaders granted these leaders significant influence, authority and financial resources, this influence was often disproportionate to the number of seats the factions actually secured. For instance, in the Northeast region, where the *Sam Mitr* faction fielded numerous candidates, the PPRP underperformed due to strong voter loyalty to other parties, particularly the PTP. Conversely, the PPRP exceeded expectations in Bangkok and the South, where the success of many of its candidates—most of whom were newcomers—was attributed more to the party label and the appeal of its prime ministerial candidate than to the strength of the factions or their vote-canvassing networks.

[63] Thammanat and his faction of 16 parliamentarians joined the Thai Economic Party after their expulsion from the PPRP. He eventually returned to the PPRP ahead of the 2023 general elections.

[64] Prawit appeared to have been sidelined by this arrangement, as indicated by Prawit-backed senators refraining from voting for Srettha Thavisin, presumably because Prawit himself wanted the premiership, while those associated with Prayut supported Srettha.

[65] Duncan McCargo, "The Real Deal: Results versus Outcomes of the 2023 Thai General Election", *Pacific Affairs* 97, no. 1 (1 March 2024): 79–98.

[66] The PPRP's decline can be attributed to its excessive reliance on patronage as the cornerstone of its party-building strategy. This phenomenon aligns with Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's argument that parties built primarily on patronage are often more susceptible to crises than those forged through

violent struggles or grounded in non-material sources of cohesion. However, it is crucial to recognize that even among patronage-based parties, there is considerable variation in their durability. Thus, the critical issue is not simply the use of patronage but the manner in which it is employed. See Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "Beyond Patronage: Violent Struggle, Ruling Party Cohesion, and Authoritarian Durability", *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 4 (2012): 869–89.